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Factors influencing the sexuality education among students in Poland – a survey study

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Abstract

Introduction: Sex education is commonly associated with preventing consequences of lack of knowledge in field of sexuality such as unintended pregnancy or sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). However, when well designed and introduced it enables children to better understand sexuality as an integral part of human nature, allows defining one's own sexuality, teaches about relationship building and raises awareness of consequences of irresponsible sexual behaviour.

The aim of the study: The presented study was aimed at assessing of sexuality education quality among students in Poland and factors influencing this process.

Material and methods: The analysed material was obtained on the basis of a survey conducted on group of young adults, especially medical students. Standardized questionnaire consisting of 35 questions divided into three parts (first part – general information about

participants, second part – sexual activity, contraception and sources of knowledge about them, third part – simple questions verifying the knowledge of participants) has been shared in social media via Google Forms.

Results: 200 participants filled the entire questionnaire (149 female and 51 male). The survey indicates that: 75% of respondents were under 25 years old; the vast majority (96%) of participants were medical students; 37,5% of participants described themselves as practicing believers which correlated with sexual initiation at the age of 20 or later; 41,5% of respondents uses physical barrier contraceptives combined with natural methods although they consider hormone-based methods combined with barrier methods as the most appropriate for them (40,5%); level of parent education and employment in medical professions were not associated with the presence and the quality of family sex education; majority of participants indicated the Internet, school or university as main information sources about topics related to sexuality; the most participants (47,5%) expressed the opinion that parents should be the most appropriate source of knowledge about human sexuality. No one chose the Internet as an appropriate source of sex education.

Conclusion: The conducted survey suggests that many young people lack basic knowledge about sexuality and contraception.

Key words: sexuality education; sex knowledge of young people; students

Introduction

World Health Organization (WHO) defines sex education as part of general education, contributing to broader health promotion and personal development of young people [1]. In a more traditional understanding, it focuses on the consequences such as unintended pregnancy or sexually transmitted infections including HIV infection. However, modern approach to sex education focuses on the promotion of behaviours which contribute to the improvement of the quality of life, health and well-being of people by enabling them to acquire specific and reliable knowledge and skills in that field [1-5].

What are the goals of sex education?

Sexuality is an essential component of healthy development for young people. Sex education is one of major thematic areas of health education, aiming at identifying the environmental, social, and political determinants of health. Adequate sexual education should enable young people access to reliable information on sexuality [6]. Properly conducted sex education should enable children and youngsters to perceive sexuality as a dimension of humanity, to gain an ability to identify their own sexuality and explore it with satisfaction, to build relationships responsibly and to be aware of the dangers resulting from irresponsible behaviour [1-5]. Equally important aspect of sexual education of young people is to raise awareness of the problem of violence and sexual abuse. Moreover, the aim of the educational actions is to build a feeling of responsibility in young people, also for a partner, in matters related to sexuality and procreation. The classes should give a possibility to verify information gained in the media with the actual state of knowledge. It is also crucial to shape the right attitude towards sexual minorities and a sense of gender equality [7].

What does sex education in Poland look like?

Polish law imposes on schools the obligation of conducting classes regarding knowledge about human sexual life, for children and youth, in classes IV-VIII of primary school and in secondary schools (the first-level branch school, in classes I-III of the general secondary school and technical secondary school). In their themes, the classes should include the subject

of the sexual life of people, the principles of conscious and responsible parenthood, family values, life in the prenatal phase as well as methods and means of conscious procreation [8]. Report of “Ponton” Group of Sex Educators issued in 2014 indicates alarming results. Young people very often not take part in sex education at school because the way of teaching, knowledge and competences of educators not meet their expectations. The knowledge concerning the physiology, sexuality and contraceptive methods is often based on myths and stereotypes. Worryingly, lessons take the form of a lecture, quite frequently without factual discussion [9]. Discussion on the sexuality education in Polish school was also presented by Woźniak M. in 2015 [10]. The author of the article emphasizes that classes preparing of youth for family life promote a model of sexuality which focuses mostly on the negative effects of becoming sexually active before marriage.

Position of parents in sex education.

Sex education should begin with Man’s birth. Small children should receive basic information on anatomy, attention to hygiene, identifying their emotions and assertiveness from their parents. With age, the information should be expanded based on the foundations inculcated in the early childhood [1]. Campaigns, education programmes or educators encouraging parents to talk with teenagers about sexuality should provide parents with medically accurate information on the effectiveness, safety and usability of contraceptive methods [11]. Based on the report entitled „ How do you know? What is the sex education in Polish homes like?” published in 2011, it appears that in many Polish homes sexuality is a taboo subject, which was never discussed. The majority of respondents admitted that they had not received reliable knowledge in their homes [12].

The aim of the presented study was to investigate the role of parents and school in sex education of children and teenagers in Poland – its quality, factors influencing it and feelings associated with topics concerning sexuality.

Material and methods

A standardised questionnaire comprised of 35 questions has been designed with use of survey-designing web tool and then shared in social media. Questions were divided into three categories. The first part was affected the general information about participants and their parents. In the second part participants answered questions concerning sexual activity, contraception and sources of knowledge about them. The third part was a set of simple true/false questions, aimed at verifying participants’ knowledge in the field of sex education. The survey was open for participation from 12th April 2017 until 19th May 2017 for anyone willing to answer all the provided questions.

The obtained results were statistically processed by StatSoft's STATISTICA software, version 12 using t-student test and chi-square test, and statistical significance was set accordingly at $P = 0.05$ level.

Results and Discussion

In total 200 participants, 149 females and 51 males, filled in the questionnaire. We were surprised by the disproportion between the boys and the girls participating in our study. It can be deduced from this that girls have more ease in speaking about their own experiences of sexuality. A similar disproportion was observed in a survey conducted in 2014 [9].

75% of respondents were under 25 years old with majority being between 21 and 24 years old (Figure 1A). The vast majority (91%) of participants were during their University studies (Figure 1B), at the medical faculty (191 participants, 96%) (Figure 1C).

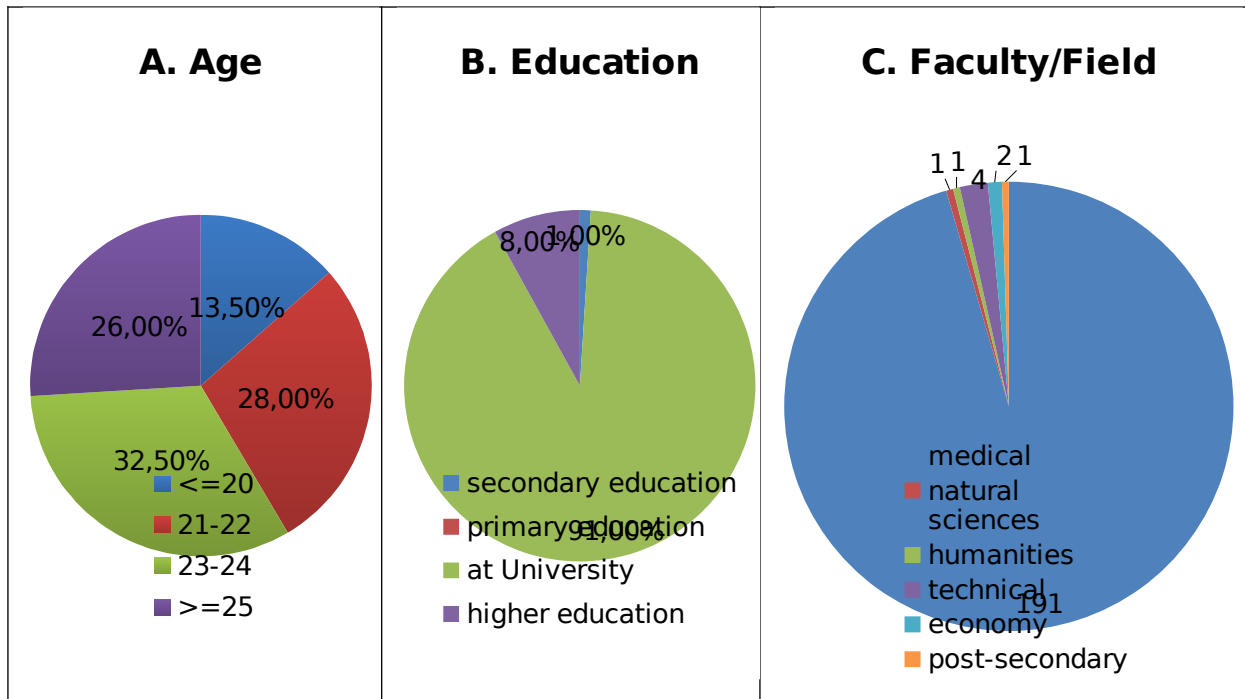


Figure 1. Diversity of respondents by age (A), education (B) and faculty or field (C)

The greatest number of participants (40,5%) had their first intercourse at the age of 17 – 19 years old. After comparing this information with religious status of respondents it turned out that practicing believers tend to become sexually active at older age (Figure 2). This correlation is statistically relevant (p value = 0,008, $p < 0,05$).

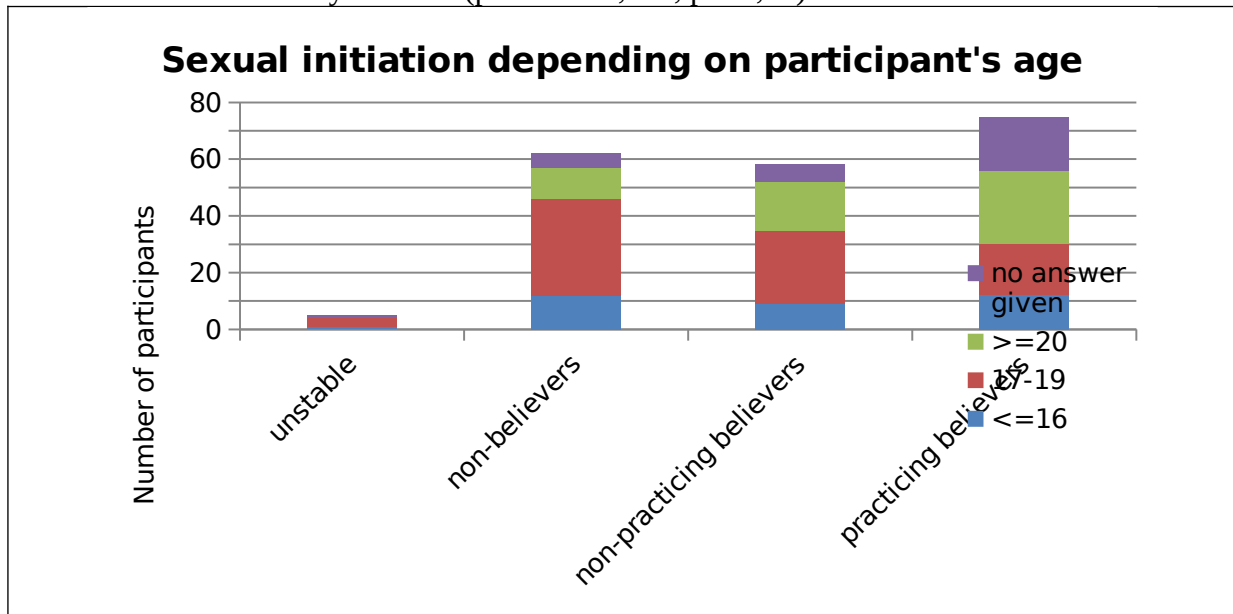


Figure 2. Dependence of sexual initiation on the religious status of respondents

However, parents' religiousness of participants did not correlate with their age of sexual initiation, though when asked about parents' religious status, it was turned out that over 80% of respondents' parents, both mothers and fathers, were believers (either practicing or non-practicing) (Figure 4). The above observations lead us to the conclusion that the age of sexual initiation correlates with religiousness of young Poles. It can also be associated with a sex education model that promotes a conservative attitude towards sexuality [9, 10].

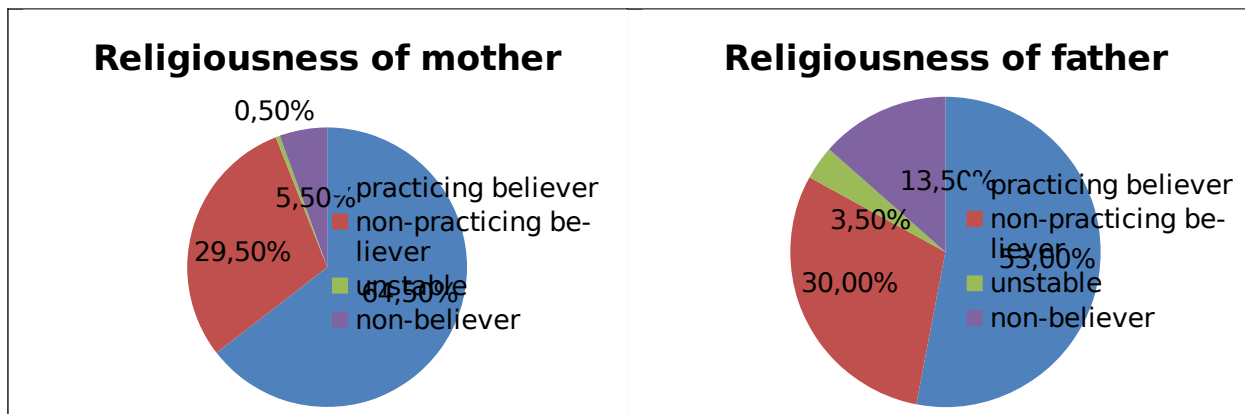


Figure 4. Religious status of respondents' parents

Participants also answered questions concerning contraception (Figure 3). It turns out that a contraceptive that is considered the most appropriate by the greatest number of participants (81), regardless of religiousness, is combination of barrier method (i.e. condoms) and pills (40,5%). Still, the most commonly used are condoms combined with natural methods (41,5%). The least often used as well as considered the least appropriate are hormonal methods other than pills ($\leq 1,5\%$). Furthermore, there exists statistically significant (p value = 0,001, $p < 0,05$) correlation between contraception and religious status of participants.

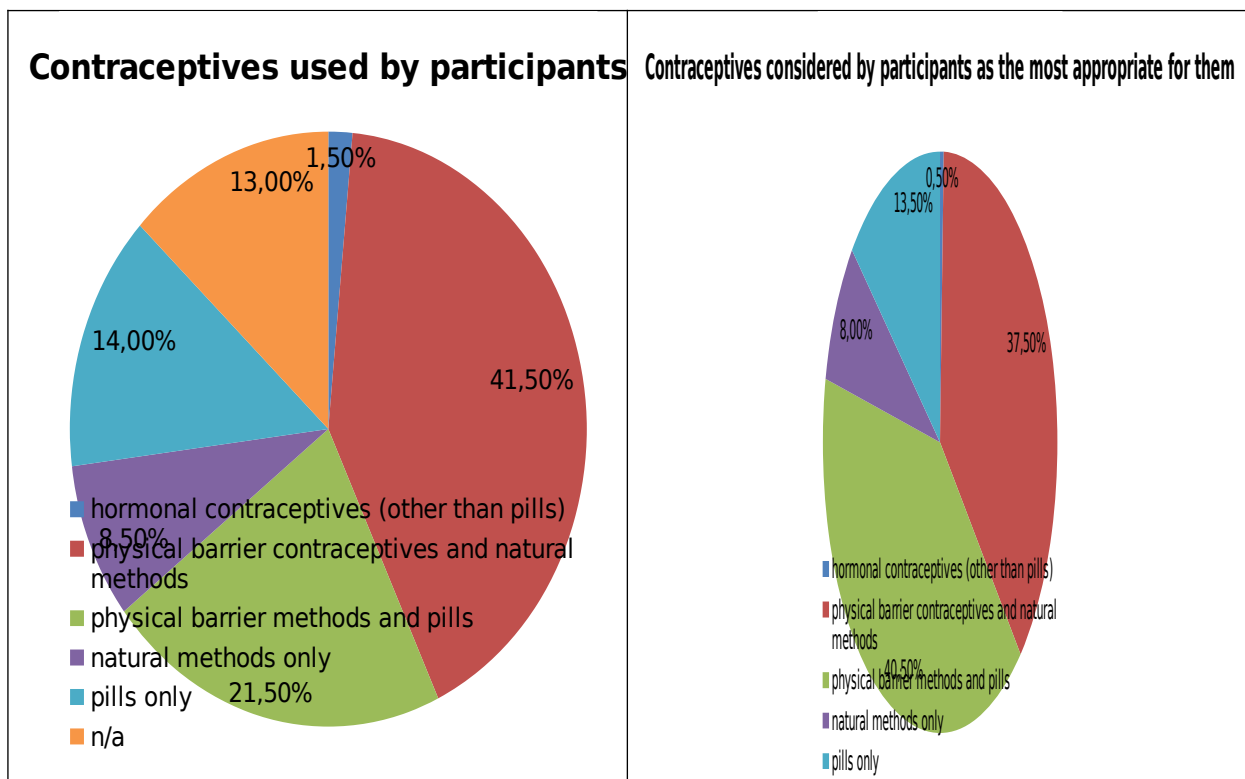


Figure 3. Respondents' relation to methods of contraception

The above analyse brings up the topic of sex education - both domestic and at school. In order to have a clear view on situation, we gathered some information concerning participants' parents. Majority of parents graduated from a University. 36% of mothers and 22% of fathers worked in medical professions. Unfortunately, this fact did not correspond with responsible approach to sexuality related conversation. Participants were asked to answer the questions "Have your parents ever spoken with you about anatomy and physiology of

reproductive system/sex/contraception?”. 35%, 45% and 43% participants answered “No, never” to the asked questions, respectively. Moreover, only 26%, 14% and 17% of the thorough and detailed information was received in response to the above questions, respectively (Figure 5). The results obtained prove that in many Polish homes sexuality is a taboo subject as available sources provide [12].

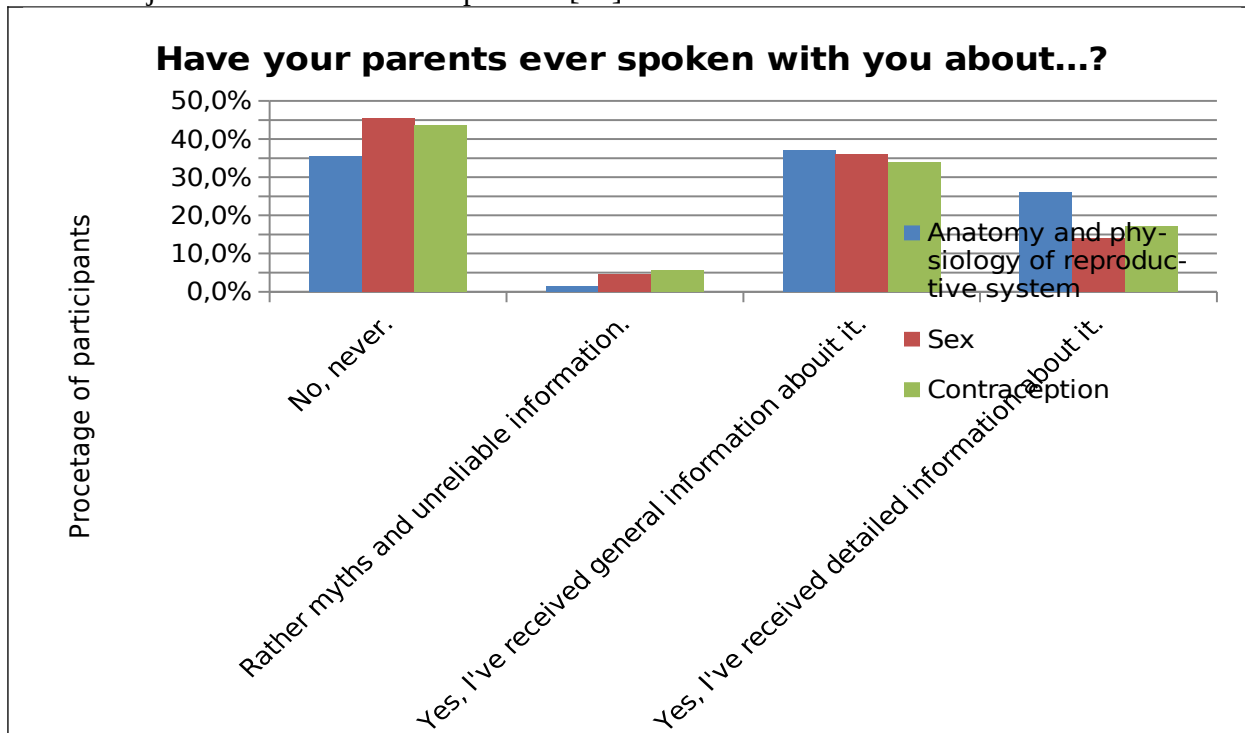


Figure 5. Parents' approach to sexuality related conversation

When such conversations took place they were the most often associated with the feeling of embarrassment (42%), but also ease (28%), amusement (12%) and shame (7%) (Figure 6).

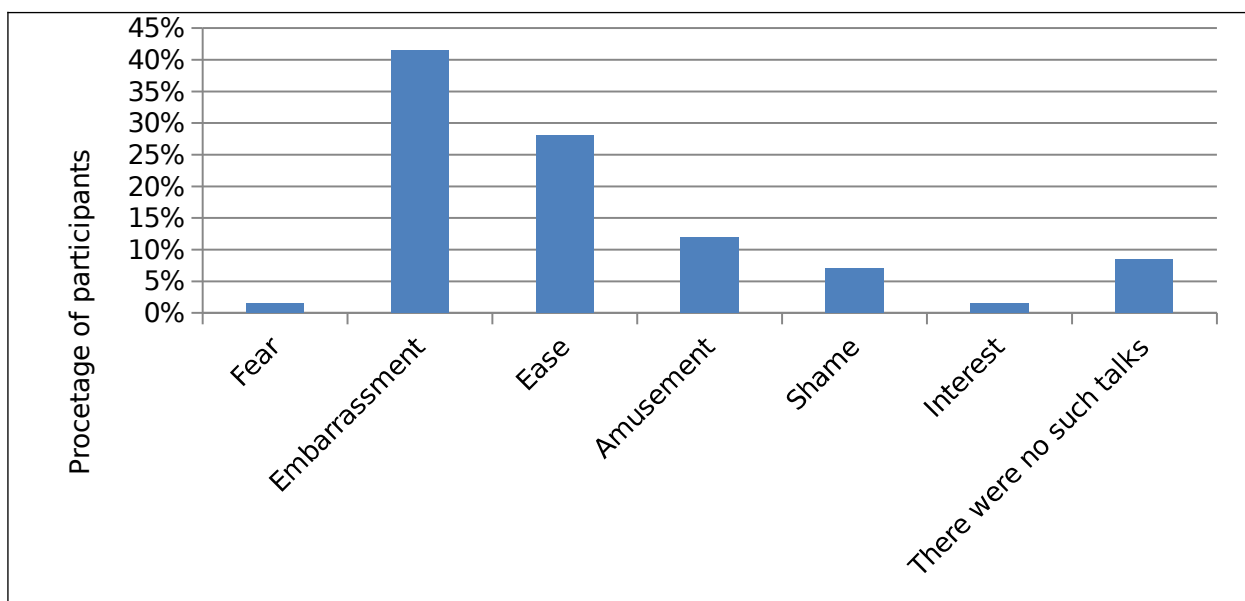


Figure 6. Feeling associated with sexuality-related talks

Quality of school sex education is even worse. Only 12% of respondents had been attending sexuality education classes out of which 76% did not receive, in their opinion,

necessary knowledge and skills in topics related to sexuality (Figure 7). Similar observations were reported by available surveys [9, 10]

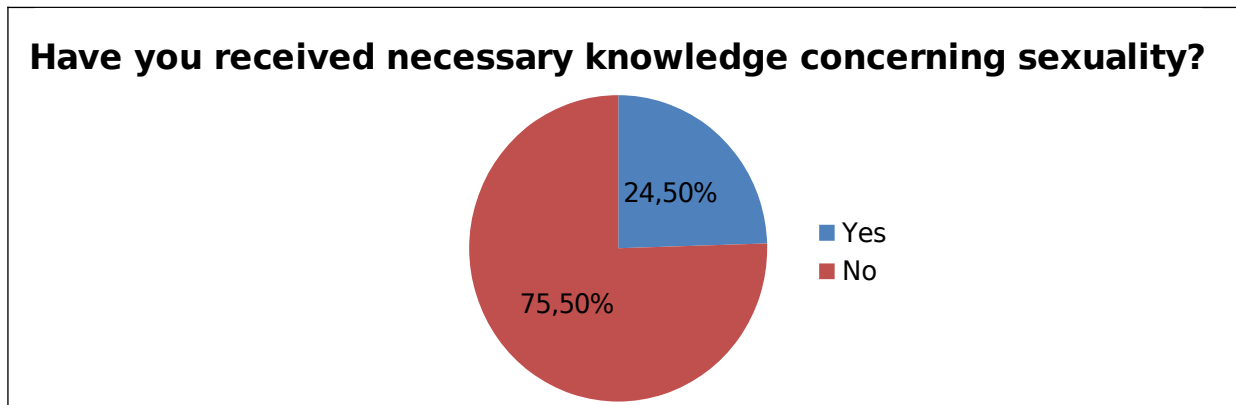


Figure 7. Quality of school sex education

In the survey, participants were asked to choose (in a multiple choice question) their sources of knowledge in three fields: physiology of reproductive system, sexuality and contraception. The obtained results can be generally divided into three categories. The Internet, school and University were the most frequently chosen, with more than half of all respondents chose each of these. Second, evidently less commonly indicated group of answers were books, journals and guides. The least often chosen were conversations with parents, peers and doctor (Figure 8).

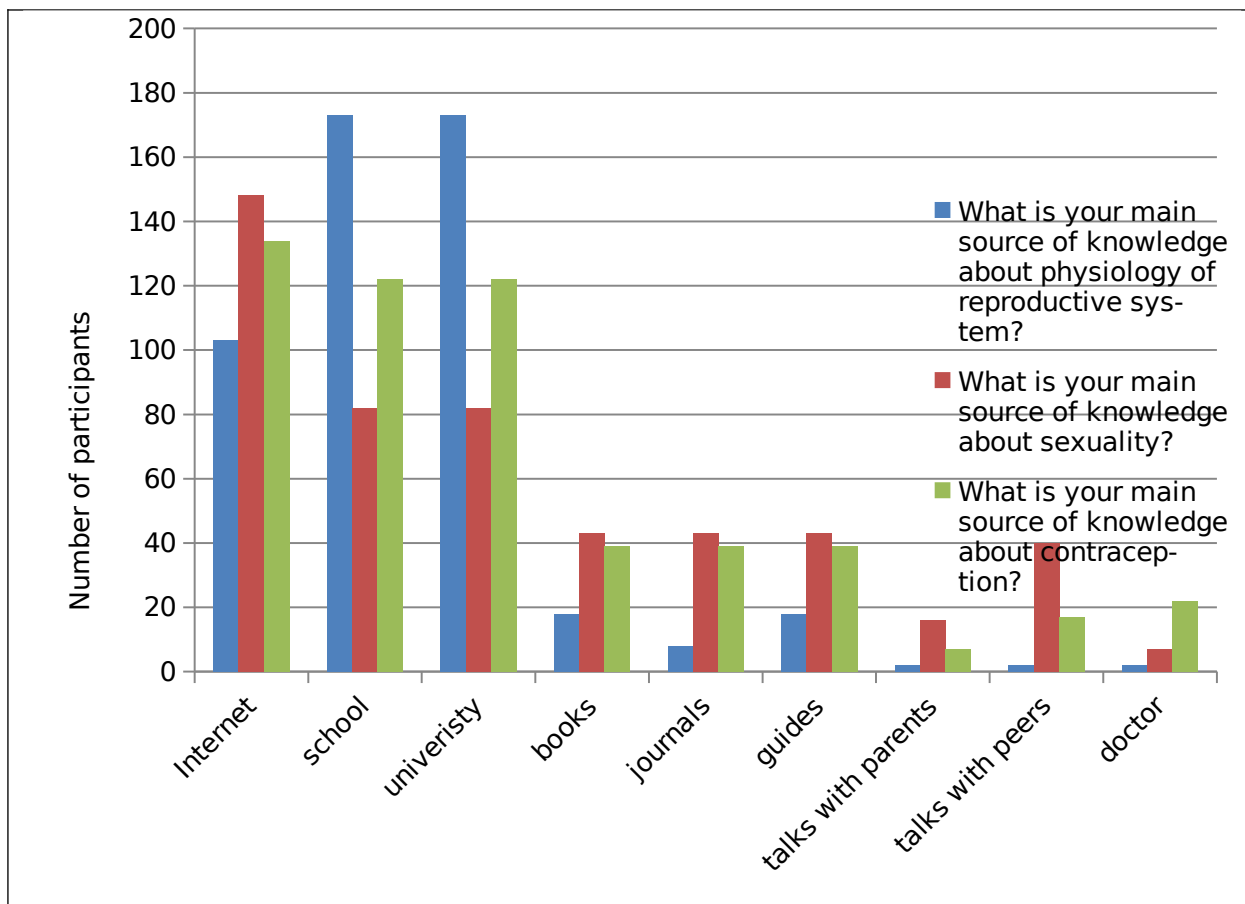


Figure 8. Sources of knowledge about topics related to sexuality

It appears that Polish schools, secondly after the medical university, provide high levels of knowledge about anatomy and physiology of reproductive system. This knowledge is often complemented by information found in the Internet. Participants claim to reach for the Internet when they need information about sexuality and contraception, mainly because they lack exhaustive answers from school teachers and parents, who were indicated as those that should be responsible for sexuality education by 1/3 and 1/2 of respondents respectively.

In the last part of the questionnaire participants were asked to assess their knowledge about contraception on the scale 1 to 5 (where 1 is lack of knowledge and 5 is excellent knowledge). 128 out of 200 participants assessed their knowledge as 5 out of 5. Then they answered simple true/false questions which allowed to verify participants' general knowledge in studied topic. Only 61 participants (30,5%) answered all the questions correctly. This proves the lack of basic information about sexuality-related topics among young Polish people.

The results of our survey demonstrating the lack of substantive, scientific knowledge about the sexuality of Polish youth and the search for it on the Internet are consistent with the studies published earlier [9, 10, 12]

Conclusions

On the basis of the conducted survey, it can be deduced that the age of sexual initiation correlates with religiousness of young Poles and that the most appropriate method of contraception for them is hormone-based methods combined with barrier methods. Young Poles frequently use the Internet and school as main sources of information about sexuality and related topics, although they think that parents and school should be responsible for their sex education. Education level and medical speciality of parents do not correlate with quality of sex education. In general, the quality of sex education both at home and at school is definitely insufficient. Many young adults lack basic knowledge about sexuality and contraception.

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